

Cheer Lithuania, but Don't Meddle

The Bush Administration welcomes efforts by the Baltic States to free themselves from Moscow's grasp. It also refuses to grant diplomatic recognition and economic aid. That position is principled and practical.

Lithuania was the first Baltic republic to declare its independence. Achieving freedom will take time. Mikhail Gorbachev, while sharply critical of Lithuania's leaders, seems ready to bargain with them over terms and timing. The sensible course for Washington, as the Administration perceives, is to stay clear of that bargaining.

Lithuania's sense of nationhood could not be crushed by a half-century of Stalinist repression. But Lithuania's liberation, like Finland's, depends on Soviet acquiescence. That's a fact of geography and power that no posturing by others can change. Lithuania must ultimately satisfy Soviet interests if

it hopes to win what it justly seeks. Lithuania's independence is for Lithuanians to solicit and Moscow to yield. That's why diplomatic recognition and economic aid from the United States would be premature. Until the bonds loosen, recognition would give little practical benefit to Lithuania — and would needlessly provoke Moscow.

Similarly, financial aid could help Lithuania revitalize its economy and satisfy the terms it negotiates with Moscow — once a deal is struck. Until then, private entrepreneurs are free to seize opportunities for trade and investment, and international voluntary agencies can offer whatever humanitarian aid Lithuania needs.

Lithuania's deliberate and disciplined effort to break free by political means deserves America's heartfelt encouragement. But America's supportive noninterference best helps Lithuania's cause.